

Public Opinion Profile OF NEW MEXICO CITIZENS

A UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

SUMMER 2000-VOL 12/NO 2

FOCUS 1: WATER ISSUES IN NEW MEXICO AND THE MIDDLE RIO GRANDE

Introduction

Concern over droughts, conflict over maintaining river flows, and legal wrangling over water rights have been prominent features in the New Mexico news. We asked New Mexicans in our spring 2000 survey how important, overall, they considered water issues to be. They told us that water issues were very important, giving the subject an average rating of over 8.3 on a zero-to-ten scale. In conjunction with our usual statewide household survey, we also asked the same questions of an "oversample" of residents in the Middle Rio Grande water planning region (roughly, the three counties of Bernalillo, Sandoval and Valencia). This gives us an opportunity to compare responses of households statewide with those in the MRG region, to see to what extent New Mexicans agree or disagree about these issues. On this basic question, the level of agreement is very high: MRG residents assigned water issues an average rating of just under 8.3.

Water as an Environmental Quality Issue

When asked to rate the importance of specific water issues, New Mexicans statewide as well as MRG residents listed them in roughly the same order, using a seven-point scale where one is "not at all important" and seven is "very important." Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1 presents these issues in order of importance found by averaging the scores of the statewide sample. Not surprisingly, "water quality" ranks at the top of the list at 6.13. Not far behind are

Table 1 <i>Relative importance of specific listed "water issues" (1 = "not an important problem"; 7 = "extremely important problem")</i>		
	Statewide	MRG
The quality of the water that my family and I bathe in.	6.13	6.19
Having enough water in our rivers to protect endangered fish and to keep the trees, vegetation and other wildlife along the riverbanks healthy.	5.73	5.80
The rate at which we are using up the underground water supply.	5.66	5.67
Making enough water available to attract and keep high-tech industries that offer good-paying jobs in the region.	4.93	4.88
Whether New Mexico can meet its legal obligations to deliver water to Texas and Mexico, and still have enough water to meet the needs of New Mexicans.	4.92	4.96
Whether there is enough water to maintain residential lawns and gardens.	4.20	4.14

Table 2

Average value of various water uses ranked on a zero-to-ten scale (0 = "Do not care whether water is available"; 10 = "You want water to be available")

	Statewide	MRG
Indoor use in existing homes	8.26	8.17
Irrigation of farms	7.85	7.59
Preserving the native cottonwood forest and vegetation along river banks known as the bosque, that creates habitat for a variety of different animal species	7.58	7.69
Providing food and refuge for fish, birds and other animals	7.58	7.54
Indoor use in new housing developments	6.87	6.62
Cultural and religious uses in some villages and pueblos	6.31	6.38
Recreation, such as fishing and rafting	6.30	6.14
Community parks and sports fields	5.58	5.66
New industrial uses, such as manufacturing processes	5.36	5.29
Watering existing yards and landscaping	4.51	4.40
Use for yards and landscaping in new developments	4.02	3.82
Watering golf courses	3.02	3.18
Swimming pools for individual homes	2.64	2.68

"having enough water in our rivers" for environmental purposes (at 5.73) and "the rate at which we are using up the underground water supply" (at 5.66). Somewhat lower importance, though still well above the mid scale value of 4.0, are "making enough water available to attract and keep high tech industries" (at 4.93) and "whether New Mexico can meet its legal obligations to deliver water to Texas and Mexico" (at 4.92). The lowest importance, among the options listed, was in response to "whether there is enough water to maintain lawns and gardens" (at 4.20).

But this series of questions dealt with "issues," and it is fair to ask whether questions about how water should actually be *used* would yield similar results. We did ask such a series of questions. We introduced the questions by reminding respondents that "there are many competing demands for water found underground and in New Mexico's rivers, lakes and streams," noting that these demands "come from cities, households, agriculture, industry, and from the environment." Then we asked them, using a scale of zero to ten "where zero means you do not care whether water is available for that use and ten means that you want to be sure that water is available for that use," to "rate the value you personally place on each of the following uses of water." The responses, in decreasing order of their averaged value on the scale for the statewide sample, are depicted in Table 2.

The responses are remarkably consistent with those shown in Table 1, and remarkably similar across the statewide and MRG samples. (The sole exception is the order of the second and third responses. Where the statewide sample puts irrigation for farms second, MRG residents place it third, just below preserving the new bosque.)

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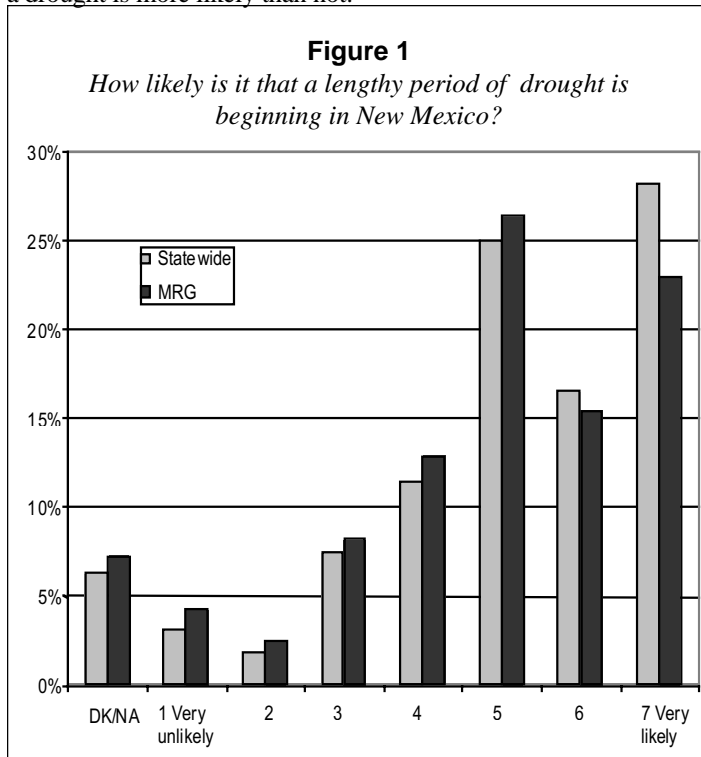
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FOCUS 1: WATER ISSUES IN NEW MEXICO AND THE MIDDLE RIO GRANDE

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Drought

We asked respondents how likely they thought it is that “New Mexico is entering into a lengthy period of drought, such as occurred in the 1950s.” We asked them to use a scale from one to seven, where one meant that it is very unlikely and seven meant that it is very likely that a lengthy period of drought is beginning. What we found is shown in Figure 1. Most New Mexicans (70% of the statewide sample) believe that there is a better than even chance that a lengthy period of drought is starting. People in the MRG region appear slightly more skeptical on the issue than are people in the state as a whole; only 65% believe a drought is more likely than not.



Nearly half the residents in the statewide sample said that they had lived in New Mexico during a drought period, and three-fourths of them indicated that they had used water differently during that period. We were interested in the likelihood that respondents and their families would be willing to take specific actions to save water during a drought. We asked respondents to rate that likelihood for each of seven actions on a scale of zero to ten, where zero meant that they and their families “would definitely not take the action,” and ten meant that they “definitely would do so.” The responses (again

Table 3

Likelihood of individual and family actions to save water in a drought, on a zero to ten scale (0 = would definitely not take action, 10 = would definitely take action).

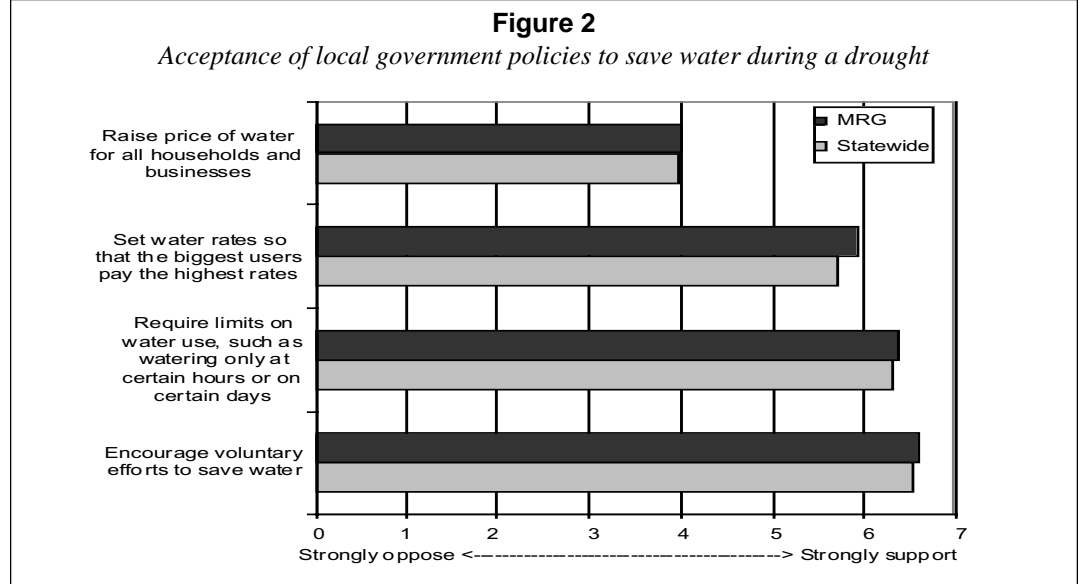
	Statewide	MRG
Eliminate washing your car	8.10	7.97
Install low-flow toilets and water fixtures in your home	8.10	7.93
Greatly reduce or eliminate outdoor watering	7.96	7.93
Replace grass with drought-tolerant plants for landscaping	7.86	8.07
Reuse water from bathing, laundry, or washing dishes for outdoor use	7.22	7.09
Flush your toilet less often	6.66	6.53
Take fewer baths or showers	6.00	5.87

listed in decreasing order of the average scores for the statewide sample) are shown in Table 3.

We were also concerned about citizens’ acceptance of local government policies designed to change behavior to reduce water use during a drought. We asked respondents to indicate their support or opposition to four possible local government actions on a scale from one to seven where one meant strongly opposed and seven meant strongly supported the action. Figure 2 shows our finding that in both the state as a whole and within the MRG region, residents would readily support all steps listed except one.

Feelings are mixed with respect to an across-the-board increase in the price of water, but the policy generates significant support as well as opposition. Figure 3 (see page 3) shows the difference in response frequencies between the two proposed water rate policies, an across-the-board increase, and one based on use.

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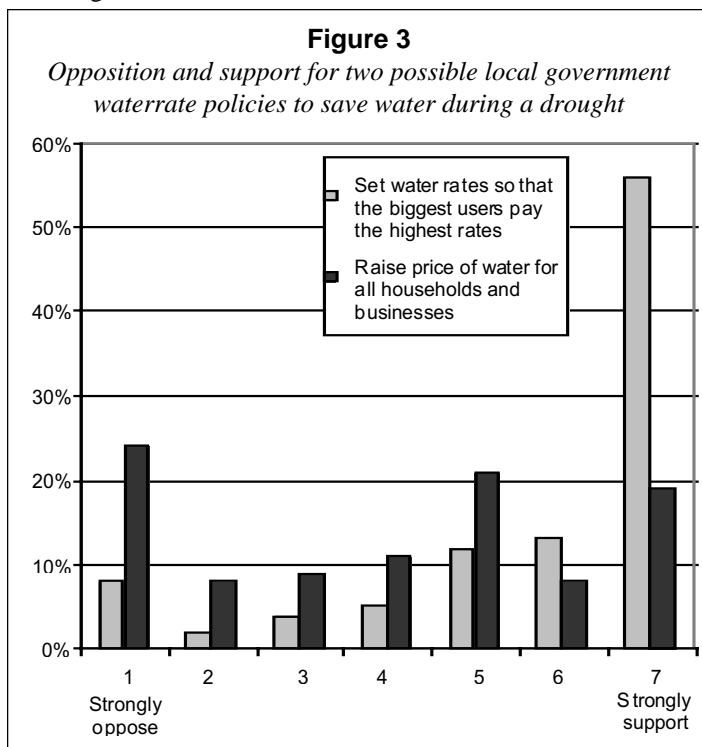


FOCUS 1: WATER ISSUES IN NEW MEXICO AND THE MIDDLE RIO GRANDE

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In-stream Flow and Endangered Species

The issue of how water in rivers should be allocated in dry years — and particularly how much water should be supplied to irrigated agriculture as opposed to leaving it in the river to preserve riparian habitat — is contentious in the mountain west, and very much so in New Mexico. It is also inseparable from a fundamental policy (and political) debate about whether the state has sole authority to allocate water, enforcing its constitutional doctrine of “prior appropriation,” or whether significant federal interests “trump” the state’s rights in this arena. A lawsuit recently brought by a coalition of environmental organizations seeks to clarify the question of state or federal authority to manage water.

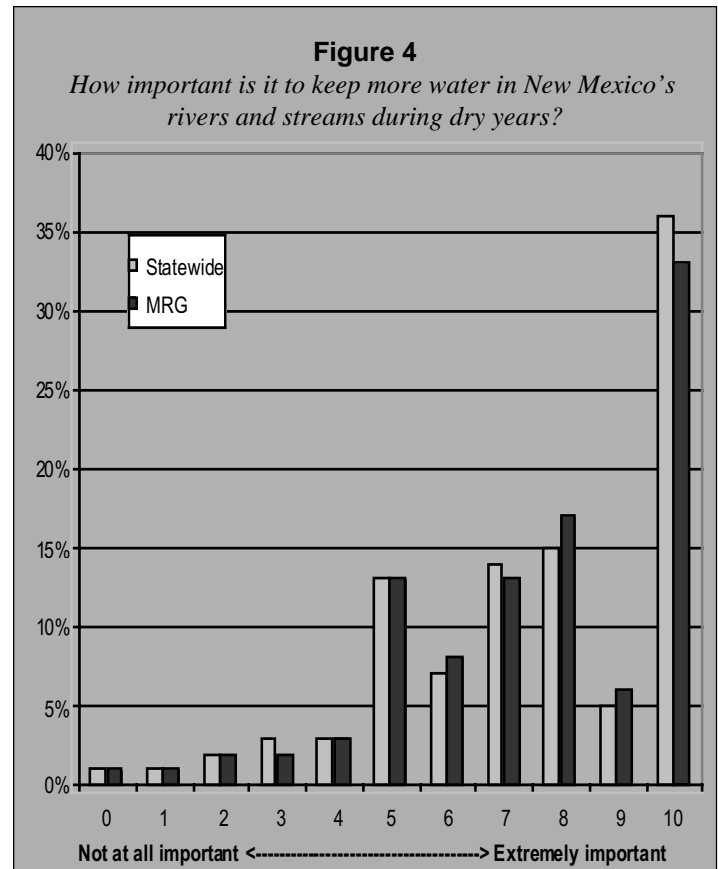


We prefaced our initial question on this issue with a description of the effects of depletions in dry years. We noted that “taking water from the river (we did not specify a particular river) can reduce its flow to very low levels, even drying up some stretches. This may severely reduce populations of some kinds of fish...[and] may also harm the streamside wetlands and woodlands, reducing the habitat for birds and animals. In addition, low water levels can reduce recreational and cultural uses of the river.” Then we asked respondents, using a scale from zero to ten, where zero meant not at all important and ten meant extremely important, how important it is “to keep more water in New Mexico’s rivers and streams in dry years?” The responses statewide and for the MRG region are depicted in Figure 4. The average response for both groups is 7.6 on our zero-to-ten scale.

Reporting about the legal controversy in the media tends to pit “farmers” against “environmentalists” with regard to in-stream flow. Because irrigation for farms and environmental uses of water are both seen as being of high importance (see Table 2), we wondered whether New Mexicans were inclined to “take sides” on this issue. We

did find some small differences. Respondents who had assigned a higher value to “irrigation for farms” than they had to “providing food and refuge for birds, fish and other animals” also felt it was less important to “leave water in rivers” than those who had assigned them equal value or who had scored irrigation lower than habitat. Even so, a majority of those who gave priority to irrigation still rated maintenance of in-stream flows as important.

We discovered that there was no statistically significant difference between the average scores of urban, suburban and rural residents in the statewide sample, nor between members of environmental organizations and those who did not belong to such organizations. In short, we found that most New Mexicans did not want to take sides on this issue, preferring to view both irrigated agriculture and in-stream flow as valuable uses of a scarce resource.



Conclusion

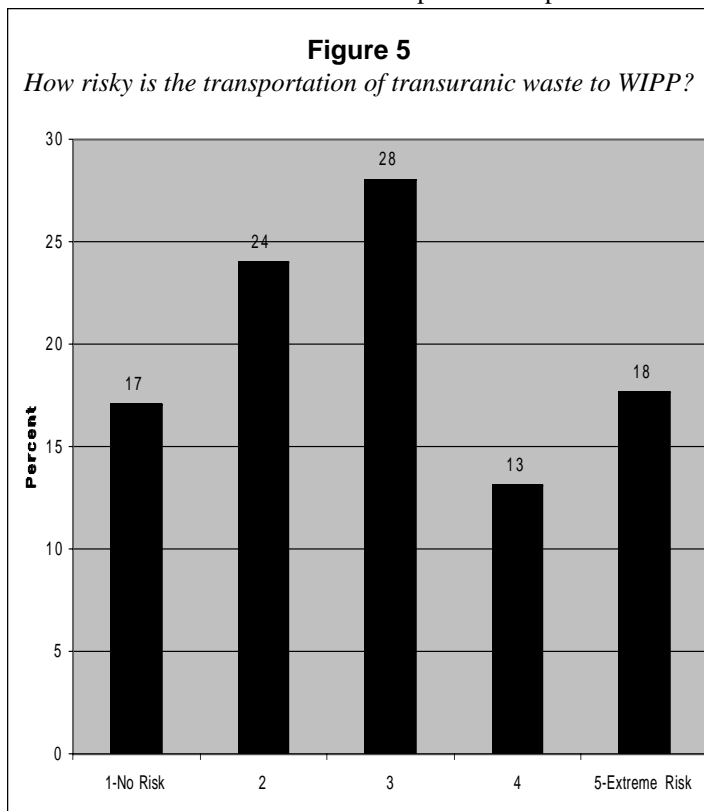
The water focus in this survey covered the areas presented here and other important issues, including attitudes toward Indian water rights, markets in water rights and transfers from traditional to new uses and places. In general, we found that New Mexicans based their responses on a mix of public health environmental and economic considerations. Remarkably, there was little difference on most questions between the responses of people within the MRG water planning region and those in the entire statewide sample. Moreover, differences based on race or ethnicity, urban or rural residence, education or income were seldom large enough to change rank orders on “scaled” questions, or to be practically important even when they were statistically significant. In short, New Mexicans seem to share more than they differ in their appreciation of the value of water.

FOCUS 2: WASTE ISOLATION PILOT PLANT

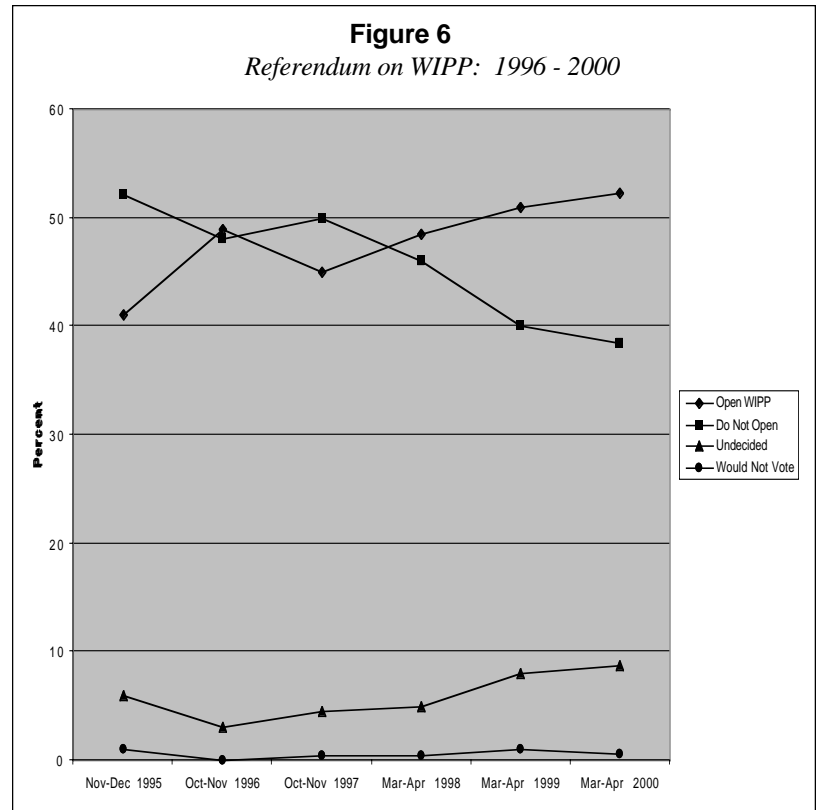
WIPP

The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad is a political as well as geographical landmark in the State of New Mexico. For many years, environmental interest groups, WIPP officials, state officials, and the Department of Energy have sought to inform (or influence) public attitudes on the issue of shipping and storing radioactive waste. Mapping the shifts in opinion is a regular feature of the *Public Opinion Profile*. For this issue, New Mexicans were asked about how they perceived the risks involved and whether or not they supported the WIPP. Most interestingly, with a year since shipments began, we now have data to trace the impact of the policy implementation stage (placing transuranic wastes in the WIPP) on public opinion.

Framing the question as an argument between opponents of WIPP, who claim that the transportation of materials to WIPP poses a significant risk of releasing radiation into the environment, and the Department of Energy, which claims that these risks are extremely small, respondents were asked to place their perception on a five-point scale from “no risk” to “extreme risk.” Responses are quite varied, with perceptions located more to the low risk end of the scale. Yet as Figure 5 shows, about 18% do see the risks as “extreme.” A related item noted how controversial WIPP has been and asked whether the facility was safe, whether it needed minor changes, major changes, or should never have been opened. The modal response, 36%, is that WIPP is safe. A further 25% see it as “only slightly unsafe and can be made safe with minor changes.” About a fifth of respondents view WIPP as “unsafe and should have never been opened.” To provide



some context, in the Summer 1998 *Public Opinion Profile*, about 25% of those who responded thought it “more likely than not that an accident would occur in the first year of WIPP’s opening.” Whether examining the transportation of radioactive waste, or the WIPP facility itself, opinion gravitates to the low risk end, with a core minority who remain deeply concerned.



To get directly at the question of public support for WIPP, since 1995 the *Public Opinion Profile* has asked New Mexicans how they would vote “if a statewide vote were held today, and you could vote on whether or not the WIPP facility should be opened.” In order to measure the impact of the actual opening of the facility, for half the respondents this question was worded somewhat differently: “if a statewide vote were held today, and you could vote on whether or not the WIPP facility should REMAIN open.” In this way half the respondents were specifically cued to the fact that the WIPP facility was in fact open.

Either wording produces a majority voting in favor of WIPP. The increase in support for WIPP that coincided with its opening, and that we noted in the Summer 1999 issue of the *Public Opinion Profile* has continued and is now at 52%. Figure 6 displays the trend from 1995 to the present. The “no” vote declined to 38%. Interestingly, informing the respondents that the facility is already open bumps support up to 59%, and reduces the “no” vote to 32%. This result puts on firmer ground our earlier speculation (see *Public Opinion Profile* Summer 1999 and Winter 2000) that support for facilities such as WIPP increases on clearing legal and regulatory hurdles and once policy implementation begins. Figure 6 and the reworded question show the impact of implementation in creating a clear if not “continental” divide in opinion trends on WIPP. Given the appropriate cue, it appears that there is even some erosion in the hard core of opposition to WIPP.

TRENDS

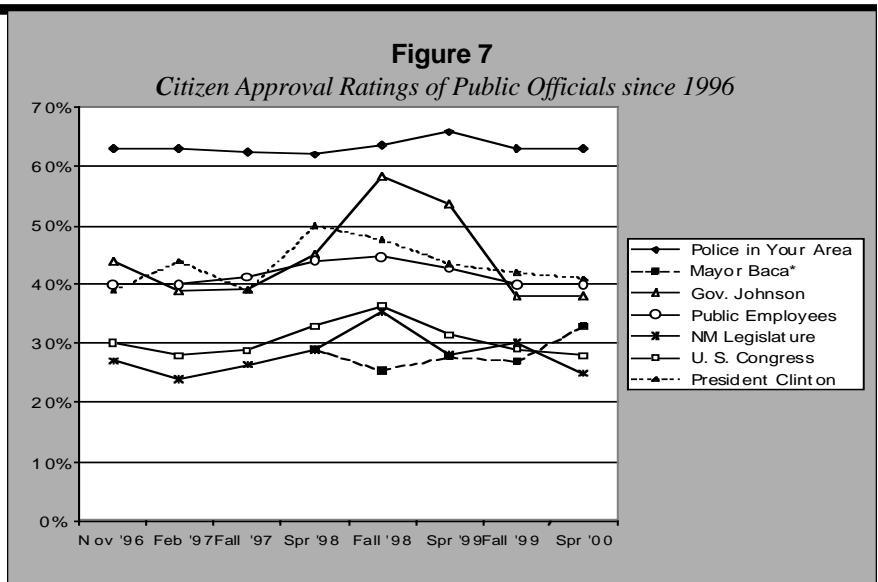
Citizen Approval Ratings

Figure 7 shows approval ratings for various groups of national, state and local officials over a four-year period. (Respondents are asked to rate each official's or organization's performance as excellent, good, fair or poor. Percentages of excellent and good responses are added to create the "approval" score.) New Mexicans' views regarding public officials have changed little in the past six months, with two exceptions. Approval of the NM Legislature, one of the more volatile political institutions in terms of approval, has dropped from 30% last fall to 25%. (Data for this survey were collected following a contentious regular session of the legislature and during a special session held in late March.) On the other hand, approval of Albuquerque Mayor Jim Baca by residents of Bernalillo County increased to 33%. It had not previously climbed out of the mid-to-high 20s since his election in early 1998.

Two downward trends, in the approval of the U.S. Congress and New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson, have stopped. In the case of Governor Johnson, the decline had been quite dramatic, dropping from 58% in the Fall of 1998 (just before his re-election) to 38% in the Fall of 1999, where it remains. But taking a longer view, his approval ratings are returning to Fall 1997 levels after a remarkable rise in 1998. Approval of Congress began dropping from 35% in the Fall of 1998. This past six months approval held steady, in the 25-28% range.

Most Pressing Policy Concerns

In each semiannual survey, the IPP asks New Mexicans to choose the "biggest problem" facing our state from a list of six: jobs and the economy, crime, public education, drug abuse and public health care. New Mexicans' opinions have shifted periodically in the ranking of these policy issues over time. Table 4 indicates the relative rankings of the six issues in each year's **spring** survey, with the most important issue shaded.



An important shift occurred in about 1994. Before that time, citizens considered jobs and the economy to be the state's most important policy issue. In 1994, crime took over as the state's number one policy concern, the position it held until 1999. Jobs and the economy have usually been the second most important issue, followed by education and drugs. Throughout the period, public health and environmental quality have consistently held the last two positions.

In the most recent survey, New Mexicans, are once again most concerned about jobs and the economy. The second biggest problem is public education with crime dropping to fourth place in the survey. Time will tell whether we are now

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Table 4
Rankings of Biggest Problem by New Mexicans, 1989-2000

	'89	'90	'91	'92	'93	'94	'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00
Jobs/Economy	1	1	1	1	1	3	2	2	2	2	1	1
Crime	4	4	4	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	3	4
Public Education	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2
Public Health Care	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Environmental Quality	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Drug Abuse	2	2	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	3

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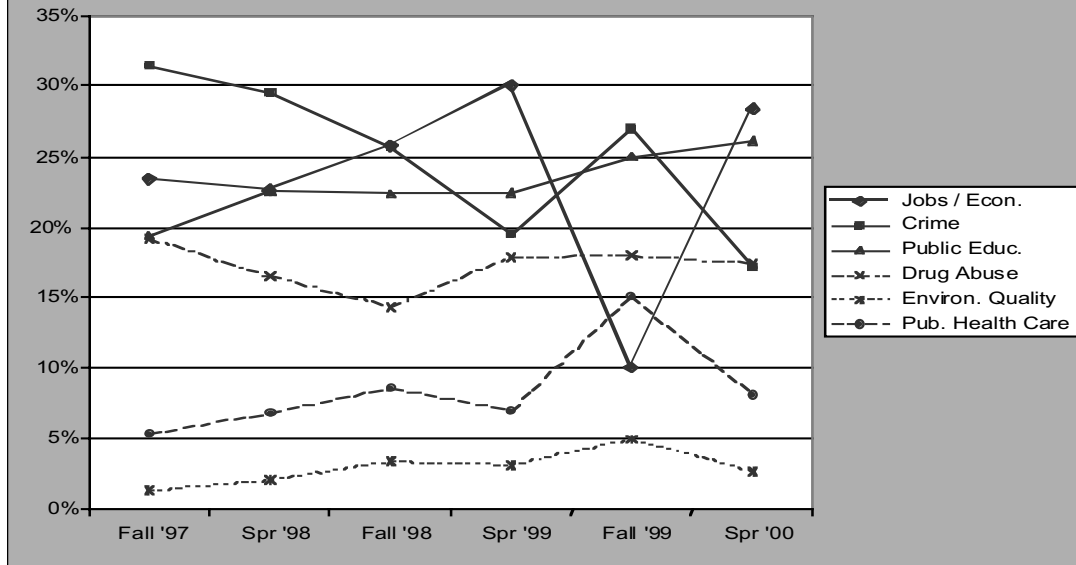
The Institute for Public Policy serves New Mexicans as a non-partisan forum for research, analysis, data collection and training. The Institute's Survey Research Center conducts surveys and research on the policy preferences and political attitudes of U.S. and New Mexico citizens. The *Profile* is distributed to federal, state, and local New Mexico policy makers, corporate and civic leaders, private organizations, the media and interested citizens.

SURVEY DATA

The UNM Institute for Public Policy conducted its surveys of New Mexico citizens through telephone interviews with 1,291 adults in March - May 2000. The telephone numbers were selected randomly by computer. The results of the polls have a three percentage point margin of error at a 95 percent level of confidence, which means that 19 out of 20 times the findings should be within three percentage points of the results that would be obtained if all New Mexico households were surveyed. The margins of error are larger for subgroups of the samples because of the smaller numbers of observations. As with any survey, a potential source of error is the possibility that variation in the wording of questions or order in which questions are asked could produce different results. The survey response rate was 58%.

TRENDS

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Figure 8*Percentages of respondents rating six issues as the "single, biggest problem facing New Mexicans today."*

stand out during this period. Crime, which pulled 32% of the votes in the fall of 1997, has fallen to about half as many (17%) in the latest survey. Even more dramatically, in the course of a year (spring 1999 to spring 2000), the percentage rating jobs/economy as the most important problem fell from 30% to 10% and rebounded to 28%. At the other extreme, the percentage of citizens rating environmental quality as the state's most important policy concern has varied little over time.

experiencing another major shift in New Mexicans' views of policy issues in the state. While the sample sizes are small, and so warrant cautious interpretation there are detectable differences in issue priorities across ethnic and racial groups. Substantially higher percentages (around 40%) of American Indians, African Americans, and Asian Americans are likely to rate jobs and the economy as the single biggest problem facing New Mexicans today.

Figure 8 is a line graph indicating the percentages of New Mexican citizens rating each issue as the state's most important for the past three years' semiannual surveys. Interestingly, some issues appear to be more volatile than others – crime and jobs and the economy

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